Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and Albert Camus's *L'Étranger*

Mitsuko Masuda

I

How variably Richard Wright, the first black American literary superstar, has been focused by so many people and scholars over the course of decades? He has been radically discussed in the light of critical theories such as post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism, and postcolonialism. Finally, in winter, 2006, Wright was discussed in the framework of ecocriticism by Scott Hicks in his "W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Richard Wright — Toward an Ecocriticism of Color." Unsuccessfully, I have been groping the way of synthesizing the paradigm of problems in the study of Wright; however, Wright studies seem to have totally gone beyond what has been supposed before. While the paradigm of problems in the study of Wright has been studied by many scholars, none of them seems ever to have suited my concerns. My greatest concern is whether there can be any specific way to feel closer to Wright and to share his mentality, his way of thinking, living and feeling. In other words, while searching for the way to synthesize the study of Richard Wright, in effect, how to get rid of the reader's defeated feelings caused by Wright's works has been groped. In the process of analyzing the message of *The Outsider* and Wright's existentialism, a key concept in order to bridge the immense gap between Wright and the reader is naturally led; it is *the Other*. The present exploration begins with a look at *The Outsider*.

The Outsider is permeated with Wright's philosophy in praise of freedom as a human being. It is not difficult to imagine that Wright, who thought of his own freedom seriously, was keenly aware of being controlled by his environment, his world in which he lived, and the existence of the people there. *The Outsider* reveals to us, at one and the same time, that Wright was shocked to discover that he had to live among the Other, who infringed on his freedom

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— and that he finally understood this. The text of *The Outsider*, in which Wright's plot, Cross Damon's story, and the narrator's description show another aspect of Wright's life and his literary world, has an attractive power; Wright's valiant challenge to the world and to himself to overcome his hostile environment is completely comprehensible, so that Wright's brand of existentialism is naturally to be understood as an inevitable consequence. Furthermore, his inescapable involvement in the Other will be easily realized.

The principal structure that underlies *The Outsider* is Cross's challenges as an existential hero through his various conflicts with the Other. The Other is one of the main existential issues of several existentialists such as de Beauvoir, Camus, Dostoyevsky, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre. It does not seem difficult to contend that the idea of the Other can be a clue to analyzing and clarifying Wright's literary world, his existentialism, and his life; in other words, Wright as a whole can be seen in terms of the Other.

Wright was born in the white-dominated America of early twentieth-century Mississippi, which was an explicit and undeniable Other for him, and vice versa; that is, his relation to the white America of Mississippi consisted of ambivalent familiarity and distantiality. To love the other persons as representations of the Other or despise them, to hate those who are the Other or envy them: these opposing emotions toward the Other evoked his imaginative writing, which embodied his challenge to the world and to himself to express his strong will to recognize, comply with and overcome those who are the Other even if they violated his freedom.

Wright's relation to existentialism has been focused on, commented on, and criticized since 1946, when he first visited France. Naturally, at first, critics dealt with Wright's impression of French existentialism, his relation to the French existentialists, including Jean-Paul Sartre, and points of comparison and contrast between Wright and the French existentialists. Although I have counted one hundred forty-four items of commentary and criticism on the subject of Wright's existentialism, most of these are still within the framework of the earlier trends. For example, in her "Notes Preliminary to a Full Study of the Work of Richard Wright," Constance Webb, in 1946, in a discussion of Wright's relation to French existentialism and a comparison of Wright and Sartre, summarizes the trend of criticism concerning the existential world

view in Wright's novels: "Like the French Existentialists he writes of dread, nausea, tension and pain. The Existentialists explain Wright, and Wright explains the Existentialists" (163). No criticism on Wright's relation to the French existentialists is more valid than this statement of Webb's on Richard Wright. It is noteworthy that this remark of Webb's was made before the publication of *The Outsider*; critics' references to Wright's existentialism began to proliferate only after the publication of *The Outsider*.

If we argue the Other as a key concept at all, we ought to discuss racial Otherness of black people in general and dual Otherness of black women in general, which, as is well-known, have become the subjected subjects of so much contemporary scholarly investigation in the midst of the multicultural movement. Nonetheless, our contention is not to discuss American racism by the Other as Edward Said tries to understand Orientalism as a discourse by examining the interdependent relationship between Europe and the Orient as "one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (*Orientalism* 1). It should be said at once that our argument depends neither upon an exhaustive catalogue of texts dealing with the Other nor upon a clearly delimited set of texts, authors, and ideas that together make up the Other canon.

Needless to say, the Other is defined as an existential term in this paper, operating as a self-contained system of difference. The Other as used here signifies the other person or another person or other persons, one's environment, one's situation, indeed even whatever within oneself causes one to sense or question his or her existence or identity or self. Accordingly, the term the Other in this paper encompasses either a singular other or a plural others. The concept of the Other will enable us to clarify the existential structure of the protagonist's psychology, a structure through which he must necessarily identify those people and that outside himself with the Other, the entity which inevitably exists in relationship to his Being and to his self.

Yoshinobu Hakutani's "Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and Albert Camus's *The Stranger*" (1989) is clearly dependent on his basic understanding that Wright's existentialism is not superficial and affects all aspects of Wright's literary world; in addition, Hakutani stresses the differences between the two novels. His detailed comparison of the two books through various key words such as heredity, environment, chance, determinism, crime, guilt, and absur-

dity, will serve as a brilliant model for comparison. Our discussion is limited to the better understanding of Wright's individuality and heterogeneity, through comparing Wright's *The Outsider* and Camus's *L'Étranger*.

II

In 1958, Charles I. Glicksberg reviewed *The Outsider* in his "Existentialism in *The Outsider*" and "The God of Fiction"; he argues that Wright's novel is strongly influenced by Sartre and Camus, especially by the latter's *The Rebel*. He asserts that Wright uses the premise set forth in *The Rebel*: "What happens to the nihilist who has lost all faith in God and has dedicated himself to the worship of power?" (18). In 1959, Richard Lehan, in his "Camus' American Affinities," had this to say about Cross Damon in the last part of the article:

> Wright's Cross Damon, the hero of *The Outsider*, may owe his conception in part to Meursault, although Wright documents his novel more from Sartre's than Camus' version of existentialism. A cosmic brother of Meursault and Caligula, Damon feels outside the course of man and society. He is the demonic hero (implied in his very name) who usurps God's place and privilege. His satanic impulses engage him in a headlong rush toward death (coincidentally, Meursault in French means "death leap" — "meurt-saut"). (268)

While Lehan's explanation seems to be adequate, it is greatly regrettable to see such a facile comment on *The Outsider*; in other words, the complexities of Cross Damon's existential character are not likely to be made clear. In contrast to Lehan, Kingsley Widmer is more understanding; he sees the novel as indebted to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre. However, Widmer puts excessive stress on Wright's pessimism.

In 1971, Lewis A. Lawson, in his "Cross Damon: Kierkegaardian Man of Dread," analyzed the use of Kierkegaardian concepts, especially dread, in *The Outsider*, criticizing Kingsley Widmer's treatment of Kierkegaard:

> Although most critics argue that Richard Wright derives much of the conceptual material for his fable in *The Outsider* (1953) from Camus and Sartre, Kingsley Widmer notes that he also employs the "organizing concept of Kierkegaardian 'dread'." But although Widmer mentions the influence of Kierkegaard in the novel, he apparently does not regard it as

> a significant factor, for he mentions it only in passing. If anything, Widmer feels that a rigid adherence to ideas from Kierkegaard damages the structure of the novel. A close analysis of Wright's use of Kierkegaard's work, especially *The Concept of Dread*, is helpful, however, in demonstrating that Wright is offering essentially a Christian, rather than an atheistic existential view. (298)

After having indicated that *The Concept of Dread* and *The Sickness unto Death* constitutes the primary philosophical sources of *The Outsider*, Lawson concludes: "With the disappearance of his urge to be as God, Cross can once again be as man and even begin to grope toward a relationship with God" (316). One can agree with his conclusion that Cross finally stops trying to be as God; for Cross will realize the nature of his relationship to the Other, including God.

In 1973, a Japanese scholar, Hiroshi Kaname, published studies of Cross Damon's purpose in life in accord with his version of existentialism. In his analysis, freedom from God becomes a burden for Cross; in the end Cross realizes that freedom lies in solidarity. One accepts Kaname's conclusion that Cross has not given up hope. As has already been observed, numerous commentaries and criticisms on Wright's existentialism in *The Outsider* have been issued so far; none of them, however, focus on the Other. Some of them nearly get to the concept of the Other but fail to understand its significance in *The Outsider*: it is very unfortunate that Amrtijit Singh, for example, in his "Richard Wright's *The Outsider*: Existentialist Exemplar or Critique?" (1984), appears either to mistake "the whole man" for the Other or to fail to understand "the whole man" as the Other: "It is a compound irony of Wright's plot and theme that Cross's choice involves the whole man in a perverted, macabre way — it involves remaking the man himself" (363). This is no compound irony but a simple truth in terms of the existential Other because Wright fully understands that no one can exchange his own existence for that of the Other and that everyone needs the Other.

Wright begins *The Outsider* at a point in which the elements of his hero's distantiality from the Other has already conspired to bring about Cross's ultimate dread. The seeds of Cross's dread are rooted in his difference from the Other. Consequently, quite early in Book One, Cross's distance from the

Other becomes the essential element of the dramatic action through which Cross's characterization unfolds.

In *The Outsider*, the narrator variedly uses anxiety, fear, terror, dread, and despair to show how Cross treats and responds to the Other or a given situation. Cross is haunted by a pervasive sense of uneasiness and insecurity which he labels fear, dread, and anxiety. These terms are not wholly interchangeable, since fear is not to be confused with *Angst* (translated as either dread or anxiety). Kierkegaard is mentioned among the readings of Cross. Kierkegaard's *Concept of Anxiety*, which is quoted as an epigraph to Book One of *The Outsider*, succinctly differentiates dread from fear:

> Therefore, I must point out that it [dread] is altogether different from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite, whereas anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility. For this reason, anxiety is not found in the beast, precisely because by nature the beast is not qualified as spirit. (42)

That "anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility" is paraphrased: "The possible corresponds exactly to the future. For freedom, the possible is the future, and the future is for time the possible. To both of these corresponds anxiety in the individual life" (91). Anxiety is freedom's possibility. Once one sinks into possibility, one cannot sense that one is just as good as the Other.

III

The principal structure that underlies *The Outsider* is Cross's trials as an existential hero through his various conflicts with those Other. The various and flexible interrelationship not only among Cross, Wright, the narrator, the female characters, Houston, and the reader, but also between Cross and the Communists, or the other minor characters, should be discussed.

Among these relationships, New York City District Attorney Ely Houston is taken up in this paper because Houston, who happens to meet Cross for the first time on the train for New York and to whom Cross renders his deathbed confession for the murders of Herndon, Blount, Hilton, and his former Chicago companion, Thomas, as well as his complicity in Eva's suicide, is a

hunched-backed man, one who recognizes himself to be an outsider, as we see from what he says to Cross: "'My personal situation in life has given me a vantage point from which I've gained some insight into the problems of other excluded people'" (499).

As soon as he is introduced to Houston, Cross becomes filled with fear: "A District Attorney? *The* Ely Houston of whom he had heard? The celebrated crime-buster [. . .]? At once his tensions began to deform the look of the world" (497). Cross has murdered Joe Thomas only the day before yesterday, so that he doubts that Houston has got on the train to apprehend and arrest him. The narrator conveys Cross's ambivalent first impression of Houston:

> [. . .] he felt intuitively that this [Houston] was the kind of man whom he had to fear not only because he was a defender of the law, but because Houston had an ability to delve into life. He was afraid of this man and yet his fear made him want to know him. (498)

At first Houston appears as an Other who makes Cross feel his criminality, and then he gradually becomes a helper to Cross in analyzing his psychological structure. The reader can easily identify Cross with Houston's hypothetical questioning Negro man in this picture Houston paints of him:

> "But their [Negroes'] getting those elementary things [the right to jobs and living space] is so long and drawn out that they must, while they wait, adjust themselves to living in a a kind of No-Man's Land . . . Now, imagine a man inclined to think, to probe, to ask questions. Why, he'd be in a wonderful position to do so, would he not, if he were black and lived in America? A dreadful objectivity would be forced upon him." (500)

What does "a dreadful objectivity" mean? Wright has Houston define Cross as an objective man, neither an insider nor an outsider, who lives in a "No-Man's Land." The narrator helps the reader to recognize Cross's existential way of thinking by describing Cross's reaction to Houston's remarks. The narrator implies that Cross is aware — unconsciously or consciously — of the existential fact that he cannot exchange his existence for the existence of the Other by changing his name or exchanging his situation, for, as Heidegger puts it, man is "thrown into" his situation: "He could run away from Dot, Gladys, his

mother, but he could not run away from this [his own existence]; it was he and he was it" (501). What meaning do those Others have in such a "No-Man's Land"? In a "No-Man's Land" there can be no man, including no new Other. Nonetheless, a man in this "No-Man's Land" can objectively see the world, which is not a "No-Man's Land," and can see the presence of the Other in the world.

Ely Houston appears before Cross again through the narrator's description of Cross's inner agitation caused by only hearing the name of Houston just after Cross has managed to cover the clues that might have exposed his complicity. For Cross's innocence depends entirely upon whether the police believes in the strong possibility of Herndon and Blount killing each other. The narrator plays a key role in interpreting Cross's feelings toward Houston and Cross's self-realization of his psychological structure through this Other, Houston:

> Houston was so placed psychologically in life that he would feel intuitively at home with his [Cross's] crimes [. . .] he had the kind of consciousness that could grasp the mercurial emotions of men whom society had never tamed or disciplined, men whose will had never been broken, men who were wild but sensitive, savage but civilized, intellectual but somehow intrinsically poetic in their inmost hearts. (644)

Wright succeeds in using Houston, as well as the narrator, as helpers in bringing the reader to understand the structure of Cross's psychology and in causing Cross to understand his own structure in terms of the Other.

When the medical examiner comes up with the theory that a third man may have murdered both Herndon and Blount, both Cross and Houston describe such a man in frightening terms. For Houston, such a man who is "'psychologically akin to either Blount or Herndon and yet somehow outside of them [. . .] with the *third* set of ideas [. . .] that no ideas are necessary to justify his acts. [. . .] That man who kills like that is a bleak and tragic man'" (670–73). Feeling "an overpowering desire to help Houston develop his theory" (673), Cross concurs: "'The man you are describing, [. . .] is one for whom all ethical laws are suspended. He acts like a god'" (674). Both Cross's and Houston's ways of analyzing this third man remind us of Camus's analysis of criminals: "We are living in the era of premeditation and perfect crimes.

Our criminals are no longer those helpless children who pleaded love as their excuse. On the contrary, they are adults, and they have a perfect alibi: philosophy, which can be used for anything, even for transforming murderers into judges" (*The Rebel* 11). Further, Camus asserts that understanding the meaning of murder is essential for a human being to know how to act among those who are the Other: "We can act only in our time, among the people who surround us. We shall be capable of nothing until we know whether we have the right to kill our fellowmen, or the right to let them be killed. Since all contemporary action leads to murder, direct or indirect, we cannot act until we know whether, and why, we have the right to kill" (12). Feeling that Houston is coming to realize his criminality, Cross waits to be "challenged" and to be "accused" (674), but Houston concludes that the murder must be double manslaughter. Like God or like a judge, Cross cannot stop with these murders alone. Accordingly, whether Cross has the right to kill has never burst upon his mind.

After Cross has killed Hilton, the Communist Party member, who justified the suffering which the Party inflicted by insisting that life is, anyway, "bare, naked, unjustifiable [. . .] existing there and for no reason and no end" (692), Cross is brought face to face with Houston. Houston posits "a *third* man" (711) involved in these killings of Blount, Herndon, and Hilton as the single hypothesis "that could tie all of this together" (711):

> "Could there be a man in whose mind and consciousness all the hopes and inhibitions of the last two thousand years have died? A man whose consciousness has not been conditioned by our culture? A man speaking our language, dressing and behaving like we do, and yet living on a completely different plane? A man who would be the return of ancient man, pre-Christian man? Do you know what I mean?" (711)

The narrator's analysis of Cross's reaction to these words signals Cross's otherness toward himself and confirms Wright's intention to present Houston as Cross's alterego:

> Cross felt his body grow hot. His judgement told him to keep quiet, to pretend ignorance; but his emotions clamored to enter this discussion, to tell what he knew. He drew his breath, pushed his personal feelings aside

> and, when he spoke, he was discussing himself in terms that were displaced and projected. (711)

Although Houston's role as a helper in realizing the structure of Cross's psychology and in making Cross sure of his own psychological structure has been clear since his first appearance in the story, that role becomes more explicit after Houston analyzes the psychological structure of the "*third man*."

IV

Camus's *L'Étranger*, which was a model for Wright when he attempted to write his *The Outsider* as a philosophical novel, begins with the protagonist, Meursault, going to the funeral of his mother, who has died in an old people's home. The scene of the burial is described objectively through the tearless eyes of Meursault in an unemotional manner already suggested by the perfectly unaffected beginning "Mother died today" (9). The reader is reported the fewest, businesslike exchanges with the Other, the fairly cool observation on the vigil and the elderly persons who gather to keep the vigil, the sight of the funeral procession to the burial site through the luminous, sun-drenched countryside, and so on; all of these create a very mundane, fragmentary impression in the reader. The life of Meursault, who leads an apparently inconspicuous bachelor life in Algiers, is truly dull. Ambition, wealth, the love of his mother or a lover, religion, normally sufficient reasons for most people to live their lives, mean nothing to him; "didn't mean anything" and "I didn't mind" are Meursault's most characteristic remarks. One day, his superior sends for him and implies his promotion to a position of higher responsibility in Paris, but Meursault is unmoved and he replies, "[Y]ou could never change your life"; "in any case one life was as good as another"; "I wasn't at all dissatisfied with mine here" (44). These are Meursault's principles in life.

Meursault seems scarcely to take interest in the Other. He has rarely gone to see his mother in the old people's home, his only blood relation. On the day of his mother's funeral, he displays not only a lack of emotion, but also the inability to tell how old she is. Meursault narrates: "When she was at home, mother used to spend all her time just watching me in silence" (10). Meursault's relationship to his mother is succinctly and vividly shown. In the same

vein, when his lover Marie asks him if he loves her, he replies that "it didn't mean anything but that [he] didn't think so" (38). Meursault's indifference to those who are the Other does not mean his contempt for them at all. The lack of his sense of disdain for the Other is thoroughgoing. Although people speak of his next-door neighbour old Salamano's living together with his dog, which has a skin disease, beating and swearing at it as "dreadful" (31), when Meursault is asked "'Isn't it dreadful'" (32) about Salamamo, he says no. Besides, although Raymond Sintès, Meursault's other next-door neighbour, is said to live off women (31) and most of the people "don't like him much" (32), even so he never refuses Raymond when he approaches Meursault. Meursault even helps Raymond to punish his mistress. Meursault never judges himself or the Other only by status or wealth, or by good and evil.

Meursault's character and his relationships to the Other are based upon an incorrigible lack of contempt for the Other, without distinguishing those who are good from those who are evil. Nevertheless, he does not decline to live his life, nor he is incompetent in living. He works honestly, never intends to get into trouble with anyone of those who are the Other, including his superior, his neighbours, and his lover Marie. Hearing the news that his mother has died, Meursault does not collapse in tears, and he answers to Marie's question whether he loves her as if indifferently and seemingly unfeelingly, but not because he is rebellious; rather it is natural that he should do so. Nonetheless, the anger of the Other toward Meursault's natural behavior because of his saying what he really thinks and doing what he really wants to do astonishes him and leads him to recognize himself as an outsider. This psychological structure of Meursault's relationships to the Other becomes clearer after the murder of an Abrabian.

After his arrest Meursault is asked by a lawyer if he felt any grief on the day of his mother's funeral. Feeling it difficult to answer the question, Meursault says that "[he] probably loved mother quite a lot, but that didn't mean anything. [. . .] The only thing [he] could say for certain was that [he] would rather Mother hadn't died" (65). Meursault's natural, honest way of answering angers his lawyer, and Meursault realizes that he makes his lawyer feel uncomfortable. Even so, Meursault wants to assure his lawyer that "[he] was just like everyone else, exactly like everyone else" (65–66). The candidness of Meur-

sault, who identifies himself as "just like everyone else," will gradually change through his relationships to the Other, including the examining magistrate, the lawyer, the jury, the journalists, the prosecutor, and the public; the more honestly Meursault speaks, the more they hate him; for the first time he realizes that he is guilty because he feels that these people hate him and they are filled with fury. Meursault is sentenced to death for the crime.

As a condemned prisoner, Meursault refuses to see the chaplain. After his fourth attempt to see Meursault, one day suddenly the chaplain walks into the condemned Meursault's cell. When the chaplain tells him, "'I'm on your side. But you can't see that because your heart is blind. I shall pray for you'" (115), Meursault explodes in anger and grabs the chaplain by the collar of his cassock. He pours out his feelings "in a paroxysm of joy and anger" (115):

> He [the chaplain] seemed so certain of everything, didn't he? And yet none of his certainties was worth one hair of a woman's head. He couldn't even be sure he was alive because he was living like a dead man. I might seem to be empty-handed. But I was sure of myself, sure of everything, surer than he was, sure of my life and sure of the death that was coming to me. (115)

What are Meursault's "joy and anger" all about? Meursault's anger against the chaplain's words "'I shall pray for you'" assures Meursault that his life has been really his own and now his death is absolutely his own; Meursault does not want anyone to say to him, this is "for you." If the chaplain had not said "I shall pray for you," Meursault could not have attained the joy in knowing that he accepts his life and death as they are, and he would never had laid himself "open for the first time to the benign indifference of the world [. . .]": "I realized that I'd been happy, and that I was still happy" (117). Camus's *L'Étranger* ends with Meursault's assertion that there surely exist those among the Other who hate him: "For the final consummation and for me to feel less lonely, my last wish was that there should be a crowd of spectators at my execution and that should greet me with cries of hatred" (117). Camus concludes that it is happiness for a human being to assure himself of the Being of the Other, even if it is to be realized by their cries of hatred.

Whereas Cross realizes the distance between his self and the Being of the

Other, and suffers from it and commits murder, Meursault recognizes himself as one embodiment of the Other and tries to get along with them, indeed had been doing so until his act of murder. Cross's sense of distance is not evident to anyone of the Other, even to Houston before Cross's fourth murder and Eva's suicide, and Cross is always aware of some specific feelings within himself toward the Other — fear, hate, pride, shame. However, the distance is not a problem for Meursault and the Being of the Other itself is sufficient in meaning for him. Cross reflects on his life that it was terrible; Meursault reflects on his life that it was happy. Although there seem to be many differences between Cross and Meursault, both of them conclude in the same way that the existence of the Other is necessary to them even if the Other exists to hate them. Both Wright and Camus seem to feel the importance of the bridge and the relationships which exist to tie their protagonists to the Other; hate is bridge enough or relationship enough to play such a role.

The first-person narrator plays the role of revealing the fact that the Other has already and always existed in a prerequisite way before the appearance of Meursault in the story, when the narrator reports what Meursault has done, said, heard, and thought; what he has observed those who are the Other doing and saying; what has been told him by those who are the Other. The reader can easily understand Meursault's relationship to the Other. The limited third-person narrator plays a role of making the reader consider or giving the reader time to consider how fully Wright reveals Cross's relationships to the Other when the narrator reports all of the feelings or attitudes toward the Others experienced by Cross, who sees everything in the story, hears it, responds to it, thinks about it, does it or shares in it, tries to control it, or is controlled by it. There are differences in how solemnly Camus and Wright accept the experiential fact that other people always exist as the Other, who cause one to sense his or her existence, identity, and self.

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